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ABSTRACT

The foundations upon which Baker University's interdisciplinary course on the history of ideas is built are described in this position paper. The particular situation of the Baker students and faculty members is analyzed by way of identifying the needs, resources, and problems to be resolved. The presuppositions and definitions from which the course planning can proceed are also stated. The terms "humanities," "interdisciplinary," "history of ideas," and "Western" are defined. The "history of ideas" is taken to mean the history of individual ideas, not the development of world views. Attention is given to the concept of "history" that the course presupposes. Emphasis is placed on the continuous and mutual interaction between the natural environments in which people live, their social institutions and informal groups, individual personalities, and the ideas upon which people act. (Author/LBH)

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History of Ideas at Baker University

Position Paper I. Foundations

by John C. English

In the fall of 1977 Baker University will offer for the first time a new course on the history of Western ideas. This inter-disciplinary humanities course will be a part of the University's general education program. It will be required of all sophomores enrolled in the college; an initial enrollment of 220 students is anticipated. The course will be taught by a staff of eleven faculty members (counting the Director); the staff will be drawn from several departments of the University. The course will be scheduled to meet three hours a week, with the possibility of an occasional fourth hour. Each student will be able to earn three hours of credit per semester.

The purpose of this paper is two-fold:

(a) to analyze the particular situation of the Baker students and faculty members who will be working together in this course, by way of identifying the needs, resources and problems which they bring to its formulation; and

(b) to state the presuppositions and the definitions which are the starting point from which more detailed planning of the course can proceed.

This paper is the first in a series of documents concerning the history of ideas course. It is possible to begin with the analysis and interpretations stated hereafter and to construct several different courses, each of which would be consistent with the analysis given. Since this is the case, a second paper is called for, namely, a description of a specific course founded upon the presuppositions cited here. Thereafter (3) a syllabus listing the topics to be considered and the assignments to be made is in order. The series continues with statements concerning (4) the responsibilities of the staff and (5) the process of evaluation.

The material in this paper is distributed among four sections:

I. prolegomena, in which certain terms are defined;
II. students;
III. faculty; and
IV. conception of "history."

I. Prolegomena

In section I, several words and phrases used to describe the course will be defined. These terms are "humanities," "inter-disciplinary," "history of ideas" and "Western."

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A. "Humanities."--The history of ideas is a "humanities" course. What do we mean by the word, "humanities?" This question can be answered in several ways. For instance:

1. The laundry list approach.--One may define the humanities by simply enumerating the disciplines which, by common repute, belong to this category. The list employed by the National Endowment for the Humanities illustrates this method. According to the NEH, "The term 'humanities' includes, but is not limited to, the study of the following: language, both modern and classical; linguistics; literature; history; jurisprudence; philosophy; archeology; comparative religion; ethics; the history, criticism, theory and practice of the arts; (and) those aspects of the social sciences which have humanistic content and employ humanistic methods . . ." This list is open to serious criticism. We might want to rephrase some of the items, but that is not the main point. The NEH laundry list offers no reason for collecting together in a single category these particular disciplines. This brings me to a second way of thinking about the humanities.

2. A teleological approach.--The humanities may be defined in terms of the end (telos) which they have in view. In an important sense, the humanities are "practical" subjects, that is to say, they are concerned with praxis. All of them have as their aim a certain kind of action, namely, action of a moral sort. Let us savor, for just a moment, the implications of that statement. The humanities are "for real;" they speak to the most intimate and the most perplexing of human situations. The major issues in the humanities are those for which men and women have fought, bled and died. Their eponym is Socrates.

In former times, it would have been said that the primary purpose of the humanities is the "formation of conscience" or the "formation of character." This kind of language sounds old-fashioned today; indeed, our pluralist and individualistic society finds it objectionable. We might say instead that the humanities help men and women to clarify their values and to make intelligent value judgments. These judgments or decisions, in turn, lead to responsible action.

I hasten to qualify what I have just been saying, lest I be totally misunderstood.

(a) To assert that the humanities are concerned primarily with moral action does not imply that the humanities are concerned only with action of a certain quality. Their proponents and practitioners have in mind, to be sure, other purposes as well. Among these, for example, are the increase of human knowledge and the experience of aesthetic and intellectual pleasures.

(b) The humanities per se are not advocates. They take no position concerning the critical issues of the day. They are never propagandists for a cause, no matter how noble the cause may be. On the other hand, there are certain values which the humanities, by their very nature, are bound to defend and promote. These are the values upon which the very existence of the humanities depends. Among them are humility in the face of truth, honesty and integrity and cultural and intellectual freedom.

(c) To say that values are the first concern of the humanities is not to say that specifically didactic works are to be preferred as over against all others. In many cases, from an aesthetic point of view, these works of didacticism are inferior in quality.

B. "Inter-disciplinary."--Before one can have "inter-disciplinary" courses, he must have "disciplines." These divisions of professional and scholarly activity have their advantages and their disadvantages. On the one hand, they are relatively efficient. They have been created because different human activities require different skills and aptitudes and because a "knowledge explosion" has and is taking place; indeed, the organization of specialized disciplines was responsible, in part at least, for setting off the explosion to begin with. On the other hand, under certain circumstances disciplines are unduly restrictive. There are certain subject matters so broad and diffuse that they overlap two or more disciplines. Each of these disciplines opens and develops the subject in question but, since it is looking at only a part of the whole, it cannot grasp and tell the whole story. In order to attack the subject matter successfully, one must bring together individuals from various disciplines. Here is where the concept of "inter-disciplinary" comes in.

There may be, to borrow a phrase from F. S. C. Northrup, a "logic of the humanities."[1] "Logic," in this context, means the rules which (1) define the subject matter and the problems of the humanities; (2) establish the methodology whereby these problems are to be attacked; and (3) state the criteria which proposed solutions are required to satisfy.[2] If there is such a logic, more comprehensive or basic than the logic of any particular discipline, then an inter-disciplinary course in the humanities will take advantage of it.

The prefix "inter" connotes both mutuality and coordination. In an inter-disciplinary course, teachers and students who have a variety of interests and expertise are nevertheless working together in pursuit of a common set of objectives. If this work is to be facilitated, a certain amount of standardization and of administrative direction is called for.

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[1]The Logic of the Sciences and the Humanities (New York: Macmillan Company, 1947).

[2]This formulation of "logic" has been influenced by Thomas S. Kuhn's concept of the "paradigm" (The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962)). For another way of putting the matter, consider the following statement by John Herman Randall, Jr.: "The logic of the cultural sciences" consists of "the categories and concepts, the methods and notions of truth and of objectivity by which men interpret these symbolic expressions of their life" (in Paul A. Schilpp, ed., The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer (Evanston: Library of Living Philosophers, 1949), p. 694).

C. "Western."--The use of the term "Western" implies that spatial distinctions are meaningful ways of dividing the subject matter of history. The people who live in certain spaces have in common specific characteristics which distinguish them from people who live in other spaces. The area occupied by a particular civilization may, in the course of time, expand and contract. It is commonly said, for instance, that "Western civilization" has its origins in the lands of Greece and Israel, comes to center upon the Mediterranean Sea and the Rhine Valley successively and eventually incorporates much of the non-European world. I believe that this definition of "the West" is an appropriate one for the history of ideas course. One should bear in mind, however, that not all historians would agree with such an interpretation. As an example of the problems involved, consider the question: Is the eastern European plain a part of the West? I would say "yes," but A. J. Toynbee would say, "no." A related question is one of time: At what point does a distinctively Western civilization emerge? Pirenne and Toynbee would say, not in the time of Homer and Abraham, but in the age of Mohammad and Charlemagne.[3] We will return below to this knotty problem of periodization.

As soon as we say "West," we imply "East." What role, if any, do the ideas of the East play in a course on the ideas of the West? At best, their role must be a limited one, because the course will be operating on a tight schedule. We would be the poorer, however, if Eastern ideas were omitted entirely. Something can be said about Eastern influence upon Western thought as in the case, for instance, of Indian influence upon the Pythagoreans and Plato. Furthermore, examples from the East can be introduced for comparative purposes. A comparison of Hindu (cyclical) and Hebraic (linear) views of time might be fruitful, for example. Nothing will be lost if students are reminded of the achievements of others. T'ang China was flourishing mightily while Europe was wallowing in its Dark Age. The magnificence of the "Great Turk" outspans that of Lorenzo de' Medici; the splendor of the "Great Mughal" leaves Louis XIV in the shade.

D. "History of ideas."--This phrase is ambiguous. Part of the problem is the meaning, in this context, of the second noun. For some people, "ideas" denotes Weltanschauung ("world-view"), Zeitgeist ("spirit of the times") or "climate of opinion." The title of E. M. W. Tillyard's The Elizabethan World Picture illustrates this point of view. Crane Brinton's well-known textbook, Ideas and Men: The Story of Western Thought, is organized in these terms. For other people, "ideas" denotes discrete concepts, more often than not the concepts of particular individuals. The titles of A. O. Lovejoy's books, The Great Chain of Being or Reason, Understanding and Time, suggest this approach. The articles in the Journal of the History of Ideas tend to proceed along these lines.

I have difficulties with both of these approaches to the history of ideas, but I have more trouble with the former than I do with the latter. Let me explain why this is the case.

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[3]Franklin L. Baumer, the author of a leading textbook for Western intellectual history, adopts this point of view (Main Currents of Western Thought (2nd ed., rev.; New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965)).

The concept of "world-view" rests upon certain assumptions. Among these are the following:

1. History may be divided along spatial lines, as in the concept of a "civilization" or a "culture," and along temporal lines, as in the concept of an "epoch" or a "period;"

2. Each of these units, whether a "civilization" or a "period," is characterized by a certain set of ideas, attitudes and values, which all of the men and women who belong to that unit, or at least the intellectual elite among them, have in common;

3. It is often said that particular individuals are "typical" of a given civilization or period or that specific literary and artistic works encapsulate the "spirit of the age."

In my judgment, these are shaky foundations upon which to build, Let me illustrate their instability by referring to a problem with which I am familar and which I teach regularly, namely, the problem of the Renaissance.

Before one can have a world-view, he must have a period. It is remarkably difficult to identify the points of time at which the Renaissance begins and ends. The difference between American and British textbooks illustrates this difficulty. American surveys of the Renaissance usually begin around 1300. British books start with 1453 or 1493. Jakob Burckhardt thought that the Renaissance began in the 14th century. Since Burckhardt published his masterpiece over eleven decades ago, the Renaissance has been pushed back to the 12th century, the reign of Otto the Great and finally to Charlemagne. At the other end of the scale, it is Baroque in Italy when it is Renaissance in England.

It is well-nigh impossible to formulate a set of ideas which truly characterize the Renaissance. If one argues that the Renaissance stands for something "new," one has to consider what was going on in the "Middle Ages." Burckhardt claimed that secularism, naturalism and classicism were hallmarks of the Renaissance. Gross examples of secularism may be found in medieval bawdy. For instances of naturalism, consider the organic forms which were sculpted in certain Gothic cathedrals. C. H. Haskins has demonstrated that the study of Latin and Greek was revived in the 12th century. If one argues that during the Renaissance certain ideas and attitudes were all-pervasive, consider these points. One finds in the 15th century not only a certain confidence in human reason but also the widespread practice of sorcery and black magic. Paralleling the skepticism of some is the vital piety of others. Feudal and dynastic ("national") conceptions of political authority stand side by side.

We have reviewed briefly some of the difficulties to be encountered in using the concept, "Renaissance." I believe, mutatis mutandis, that similar difficulties would be found if one were to examine concepts such as "classicism," "romanticism" or the "age of anxiety." Note that I do not claim that we should discard entirely such "classificatory generalizations" (even if that

were possible). I do claim, however, that to structure a required course in terms of such ambivalent and potentially misleading categories is an unwise procedure.

Let us turn now to another model of intellectual history, the history of discrete concepts. This is the model for which I would argue. In my judgment, such an approach carries with it several advantages. For instance:

1. My basic question concerning the world-view approach is this: Does it do justice to what actually happened? Given the volume and the random quality of the surviving evidence, difficulties in constructing a representative sample, and the inevitable problems of synthesis and communication, my answer is, not likely. When we talk and think about the past, we are dealing with probabilities. We can have more confidence in statements concerning specific ideas and particular events than we can in statements concerning general ideas and aggregations, because the accuracy of the former can be established more firmly than the accuracy of the latter.

2. Discrete ideas can be associated with specific individuals who have thought and written about them. Such an association is a gain for concreteness and for interest.

3. The scope of a discrete concept is narrower than that of a world-view. It may be less time-consuming, therefore, to present discrete ideas than it is to describe world-views. In an introductory course, in which our time is severely limited, this is an important consideration.

II. Students

In this section several observations concerning students will be presented. Some of these observations apply to college students in general; others refer to Baker students in particular.

A. Urbanism.--Since the 18th century, at least, there has been a universal movement from the farm to the city. The majority of students who come to Baker come from an urban environment. While we may perceive in the United States a certain migration from the city to the countryside, the stronger trend continues to run from rural places to urban ones. The greater number of Baker students, we may predict, will settle in towns and cities.

The urban background of students is both a help and a hindrance, insofar as understanding the past is concerned. It is a help when one is discussing the urban cultures of the past. For most of recorded history, however, men and women have lived in the countryside and depended upon agriculture for a living. City folk are ill-prepared to appreciate what this means.

As the media remind us continuously, the world's cities are in trouble. Yet these are the conurbations from which students come and to which they will return. Can a course in the history of ideas help students to understand the problems of the cities and to reflect upon the value questions involved in making civic policy?

B. Values.--We are living in an age of moral confusion and moral uncertainty. Which values proposed for our adoption are in fact valid? How can we apply these values to concrete situations? These are questions for which there are no easy answers. Historical studies and contacts with other cultures have impressed upon us the relativity of values. Technological changes, symbolized by the Bomb and the Pill, have altered the contexts in which moral decisions are to be made. We have just emerged from a decade or more in which the perennial gap between the ideal and the actual became conspiciously wide. The ideal of the just war was violated by Vietnam; the ideal of official probity was besmirched by Watergate. Many professions and social roles, once held up as models to imitate, have lost their attractiveness. The older generation, gazing upon the American past with a nostalgic eye, continues to preach outmoded values which modern young people have little or no chance of realizing. The Horatio Alger myth of unlimited opportunity, for instance, makes little sense in an era of expanding population and shrinking resources.

C. Identity.--Erik Erikson, in his studies of "life history," distinguishes among several stages in the process of growing up. One of these is the stage of "youth." Several of the things which Erikson says about "youth" are apposite here. First of all, late adolescence is a period in which individuals develop what Erikson calls "historical perspective." He defines this phrase in the following terms: "A sense of the irreversibility of significant events and an often urgent need to understand fully and quickly what kinds of happenings in reality and in thought determine others, and why."[4] Secondly, "youth" is a stage in which an individual strives to achieve a "sense of identity." Erikson hesitates to define this phrase in exact terms.[5] His description of the individual who has a strong identity suggests what he means, however; such a person is sure that he is a man (or that she is a woman); he knows that he is able to master his drives; he knows who he is and what he wants to be; he knows what he looks like to others; and he knows how to make the right decisions without, once for all, committing himself to the wrong friend, sexual partner, leader or career.[6] Third, Erikson correlates certain values and certain stages of life. No value can be "animated" (his word) prior to the stage to which it is specific. The distinctive "virtue" of youth is "fidelity." Young people are searching "for something and somebody

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[4]"Youth: Fidelity and Diversity," in Erik H. Erikson, ed., Youth: Change and Challenge (New York: Basic Books, 1963), p. 12. The validity of this statement was questioned by one Baker student who read the first draft of this paper.

[5]Erik H. Erikson, Life History and the Historical Moment (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1975), p. 18. Erikson's lengthy description of the "identity crisis" (pp. 18-21) is worth reading.

[6]In George S. Klein, ed., Psychological Issues. No. 1. Identity and the Life Cycle (New York: International Universities Press, 1959), p. 93.

to be true to."[7] A survey published recently in "The Chronicle of Higher Education" bears out this point. 67.7% of the freshmen entering Protestant colleges in the fall of 1976 gave as an objective which they considered to be "essential or very important," "developing a philosophy of life."[8]

D. Relationship to the past.--This is a catch-all category for certain attitudes towards time and history.

1. Present-mindedness.--There is a feeling among many that what happened the day before yesterday has no significance today; to use the well-worn word, the past is "irrelevant." This attitude, I believe, is a spin-off from the doctrine of progress. Each successive period in world history represents an increase of knowledge and an improvement in virtue. All of history leads up to the apex upon which we stand. The Greeks have nothing to teach us because they are early and "primitive." The latest is wisest and best. The melancholy among us (or the realistic?) may see this as another instance of hubris. However that may be, here is an attitude to be taken into account.

2. Ignorance of the past.--Students, for the most part (and their elders, for that matter), know very little about the past. This ignorance works to their disadvantage, perhaps in ways of which they are unaware. For instance, they are easily victimized by those who use analogical arguments in support of their positions on public policy. During the Johnson administration, to take an example, it was argued that American withdrawal from Indochina would lead to another "Munich." In order to evaluate that argument, one needs to know a good deal about European and Asian history. Another instance: What appears to be a bright new idea, shiny and fresh from the mint, may in fact be a tired old idea that has been put to the test and found to be wanting.

3. Inability to position events in time.--If we think of time in terms of spatial dimension, students often fail to grasp the relative distance between particular events. The distance between Louis XIV and the French Revolution, let us say, becomes very short; consequently, one fails to appreciate the magnitude and complexity of the events which had to transpire before the Revolution broke out.

4. Attitude toward change.--We are living in an age in which social change, at least on certain levels, is proceeding at a rapid rate. It is easy for students to assume that such a rate is "natural," that it has always gone this way. In fact, of course, the rate of social change varies; some communities and some periods have been relatively static.

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[7]Erikson, "Youth: Fidelity and Diversity," p. 3.

[8]Only "helping others who are in difficulty" (70.9%) and "becoming an authority in his field" (69.2%) ranked higher as far as these colleges were concerned. "Being successful in his own business" scored 41.9% ("The Characteristics and Attitudes of 1976-77 Freshmen," Chronicle of Higher Education, XIII (January 10, 1977), p. 13).

E. Visual orientation.--Marshal McLuhan tells us that we have passed from a typographical to an electronic age. However that may be, the high school graduate has spent more time in front of a television set than he has in the school classroom. He has become acclimated to pictorial representations. This is a good reason for making extensive use of audio-visual resources. Other reasons are efficiency: In some cases, a single picture is indeed worth a thousand words; and variety: sight and sound are means of arousing and sustaining interest.

F. The general education requirement.--Since the history of ideas is a required course, students from every department on campus will be enrolled in it. This situation has both its positive and negative aspects.

On the one hand, students will bring to the course a considerable range of knowledge and a wide variety of experiences. These are valuable resources upon which teachers can draw in order to enrich classroom discussions. Some students will have special skills which they can be encouraged to use. I hope that the actors, musicians, debaters, photographers, artists and computer programmers in the course will have opportunities to display their talents.

On the other hand, students who are compelled to take a course of no immediate interest to them may offer some resistance to it. If, under these circumstances, significant learning is to occur, this resistance must be overcome.

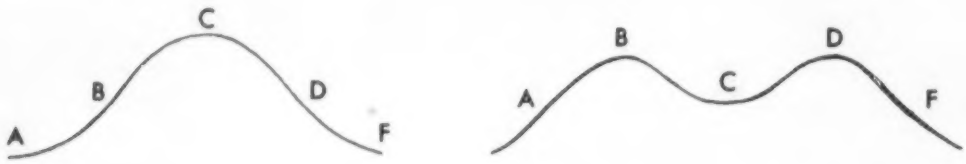
Our chances of success will be increased if:

1. The objectives of the course are clearly defined and well understood;
2. The connection between the information which students are expected to learn and their situation in the world today is clear;
3. Students have an opportunity to identify for themselves similarities and differences between the past and the present; and
4. Students have a chance to use their newly acquired information in order to solve problems which are distinctively their own or to answer questions which they have posed for themselves.

G. Student backgrounds.--International and minority students form fifteen percent of the Baker student body. Communication between members of the majority and of the various minorities offers to all concerned opportunities to replace stereotypes with hard facts and to extend the range of their sympathies. On the other hand, the detailed study of the Western tradition required by this course may be another form of "culture shock." Further, those for whom English is a second language may have particular difficulties with the spoken and written word.

H. Intellectual ability.--Baker students exhibit a considerable range of intellectual abilities, ranging from low to high. I infer from this fact that the history of ideas course must offer something to people distributed all along this intellectual continuum. If the entire course is pitched to the

hypothetical "C" student, this will be too much for below-average and marginal individuals and too little for the superior and exceptional students. In either case, but for opposite reasons, frustrations will arise and not much learning will occur. The necessity of providing both basic data which everyone can be expected to learn and materials which will challenge the "better" students is borne out by a situation which several faculty members have described to me. If one plots the students' test scores along a curve, he does not get the bell-shaped curve which we have been led to believe is "normal." He gets, rather, an "ox-bow" effect, in which the scores are bunched, not at the C level, but either at the A/B or D/F levels. In visual terms, the situation looks like this:



I. Operational difficulties.--I am placing under this heading several factors which bear upon students' chances of success in college.

1. Reading difficulties.--Not a few faculty members have mentioned to me that many of their students do not read well; my experience tallies with their observations. The staff for the history of ideas shares with all the members of the faculty responsibility for helping students to improve their reading skills. However, there are limits as to what one can do in a single course. If a student's skills are rudimentary, he can neither catch up nor keep up. It would be less frustrating, both for the student and the staff, if he were to postpone this course.

2. Difficulties with abstract ideas.--Many students find it difficult to comprehend abstract ideas. This fact has its implications for method; it suggests that one should begin with the familiar and concrete and move toward the theoretical and abstract. Further, it may mean that certain ideas must be excluded from consideration, on the grounds that they are too esoteric to explain readily.

3. Logical difficulties.--It is difficult for many students to follow and to construct either deductive or inductive arguments. We have an opportunity here, to help students learn to think in a logical manner. We also have a problem; closely argued readings may have to be omitted from the course.

4. Writing difficulties.--Much of what was said above on the subject of reading can be repeated here under the heading of writing. The staff is responsible for helping students to become skillful writers. Once again,

however, there are limits as to what can be done in a course of this kind. We cannot teach students the rudiments of writing. However, if the basic skills are there, we can help students to refine their use.

III. The Faculty

By implication at least, several of the points listed in the foregoing section pertain not only to students but also to the faculty. Here are some additional observations which refer specifically to faculty matters.

A. Faculty Responsibility.--In my judgment, the entire faculty of the University, not just the Director and the staff, are responsible for the success of the course in the history of ideas. This joint responsibility is symbolized by the fact that the General Education Committee includes representatives from each of the five Divisions. The faculty can exercise its responsibility in various ways; for instance, it can clarify for students why this course is required and what its purposes are; it can make suggestions concerning the content and the methodology of the course; and it can offer compliments and criticisms, if and when these are deserved. I hope that from time to time faculty members who are not regular members of the staff can participate in the course as guest lecturers and performers.

B. The Staff.--The staff for this course is drawn from a variety of disciplines. This circumstance has both its advantages and disadvantages.

A group of this sort will know more about the subject matter of the course, however that is defined, than any single individual is likely to know. The abundance of expertise makes for a richness and a variety which would be almost impossible to attain otherwise.

A course of this kind offers to the members of the staff particular opportunities to learn about areas which are new to them. Since each staff member is in continual contact with persons from other disciplines, he has numerous occasions on which to learn from them and to relate his discipline to theirs.

Because the content of the course is drawn from several disciplines, one may be required to teach topics with which he is not entirely familiar. This situation can lead to a superficial treatment of the subject or to an unduly large number of errors concerning it. Further, if the teacher is uneasy and unsure of himself, this dis-ease may be communicated to students, with potentially unhappy results.

Since the faculty for the course may be asked to deal with unfamiliar materials, and since its time for preparation is severely limited, it is up to the administration and the Director to help the staff to make the most efficient use of the time which is available. The administration, for instance, might furnish faculty development funds to be used in formal study. The Director might prepare lists of background readings or arrange seminars in which faculty members can teach one another.

For the most part, the faculty members appointed to the history of ideas staff will be teaching not only an inter-disciplinary course but several "disciplinary" subjects as well. Given the organization of higher education and the ways in which the faculty is trained, one may be tempted to feel, not that his general education and departmental courses are of equal importance, but that his "real" responsibility is to his discipline and his department. This temptation requires some effort to overcome. It is reasonable to expect, for instance, that one will spend at least as much time preparing for the history of ideas course as one would spend in preparing for a departmental course which he has not taught before.

The French have a phrase, déformation professionnelle. Just here I want to refer to one aspect only of this "professional deformation." Each discipline has particular ways of defining its special issues and problems and the methods which it will use to attack these problems. We tend, I believe, to interpret whole ranges of phenomena in terms of our own particular definitions. Since we are so close to these definitions, we find it hard to understand why others do not employ them as well. Their failure to recognize what is "obvious" to us can lead to an immoderate amount of frustration and indeed rage. If hard feelings and a breakdown in communication are to be avoided, a considerable degree of forebearance and self-awareness is called for.

C. Satisfactions.--We are concerned, first and foremost, with the intellectual development and personal growth of the students enrolled in the history of ideas course. We should also be concerned with the professional development and the individual well-being of the staff. I trust that the staff can come to enjoy what it is doing and to know the satisfaction of a job well-done. One may hope that it will receive, in return for dedicated service, public recognition and tangible rewards.

IV. Conception of "History"

A historian has been chosen, for good or ill, as the Director of this course. Since he is responsible for shaping the history of ideas program, albeit with the cooperation and under the control of others, a statement concerning "history" as he sees it seems to be in order. ("History" in this context refers both to the products of the historian's study and to the discipline of which he is a part.)

Let me begin with a fundamental point which, I fear, persons who are not members of the discipline sometimes fail to appreciate. Historians are interested not only in the question, What happened? but also in the question, Why did it happen? The point was well put by Polybius a long time ago:

> What does it profit the reader to wade through wars and battles and sieges of towns and enslavements of peoples, if he is not to penetrate to the knowledge of the causes which made one party succeed and the other fail in the respective situations?

> The results of transactions are merely entertaining to the reader, whereas research into the previous dispositions of the agents is profitable to the serious student.[9]

Adapting this thought to our present purposes, in a history of ideas course one not only describes the content of the ideas, he also explains (among other things) why these ideas occurred to anyone in the first place.

Philosophers of history debate the question, What constitutes a satisfactory historical explanation? There are two major schools of thought concerning this subject. We may label one of these the "narrative" school, and the other, the "analytic" school. In the former case, the story is the explanation. If one can identify the origin of the institution or the policy in which he is interested, and if he can trace, step by step, the succession of events which connects the origin and the outcome, he is said to have "explained" the policy in question. This concept of historical explanation can be traced back to the Greeks;[10] it has its defenders today, such as Jack H. Hexter and Walter B. Gallie.[11] If I am not mistaken, however, this point of view is losing favor among professional historians. There is a tendency to prefer explanations in terms of causes, that is to say, "analytic" explanations. The feeling is abroad, and Polybius implied as much in the 2nd century B. C., that narrative histories are incomplete; they do not tell us as much about the past as we are capable of knowing. At any rate, that is the viewpoint which is adopted here.

Now let us return to the history of ideas, a subject which was brought forward in the prolegomena (see page 4). At that point, one may recall, the history of world-views was set aside in favor of the history of discrete ideas. The latter approach, at least as practiced by Arthur O. Lovejoy, has been criticized for its "excessive atomism,"[12] and there is a measure of truth in that criticism. Further, Aristophanes' criticism of Socrates is one which may apply to Lovejoy as well. His "ideas" do tend to float around amidst the clouds, far removed from the world of experience.[13] If we intend

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[9]"World History," Book XI, chapter 19, quoted by A. J. Toynbee, ed., Greek Historical Thought (New York: Mentor Books, 1952), p. 147.

[10]Robert A. Nisbet, Social Change and History: Aspects of the Western Theory of Development (London: Oxford University Press, 1969).

[11]J. H. Hexter, The History Primer (New York: Basic Books, 1971); W. B. Gallie, Philosophy and Historical Understanding (2nd ed.; New York: Schocken Books, 1968).

[12]Baumer, Currents, p. 4.

[13]Although this is certainly not Lovejoy's intention: "The historian's, and especially the intellectual historian's, general and perennial problem is . . . the problem of human nature and human behavior, including under the latter intellectual behavior - the processes by which individual and group interests, opinions, and tastes are formed and the sequences and laws, if any, of their changes - so far as a knowledge of the acts, thoughts, and feelings of men in the past may throw light upon these matters. . . . His [the historian's] task is to become acquainted, as thoroughly and as objectively as he can, (continued)

to explain and use them, they have to be brought down to earth.

In order to explain an idea, a variety of factors must be taken into account; to speak more generally, an historical event has more than one cause. For our purposes, either an idea is in the mind of an individual or it is no place. This person's ideas reflect both his mental and emotional state (his "personality") and his bodily or physical state. Each of these states, in turn, is influenced, directly or indirectly, by the social environment and by the physical environment in which he lives. There is mutual influence or reciprocal action, once again, either direct or indirect, among all of the factors which I have mentioned. Furthermore, as time goes by, each of these factors changes, to a greater or lesser degree. As each one changes, its relationships to the others change as well.

Perhaps the following diagram will help to clarify this situation which I have sketched all too hastily. The parallel lines at the top and bottom of the picture represent the passage of time. The pointed lines are lines of reciprocal influence. (It will be recognized, of course, that the concrete historical situation is considerably more complicated than this diagram suggests. The category, "social environment," for instance, includes a numerous list of institutions, family, school, place of work, church and government, to name a few only. In practice the inter-relationships between a given individual and each of these institutions, and among all of these institutions, are to be taken into account.)

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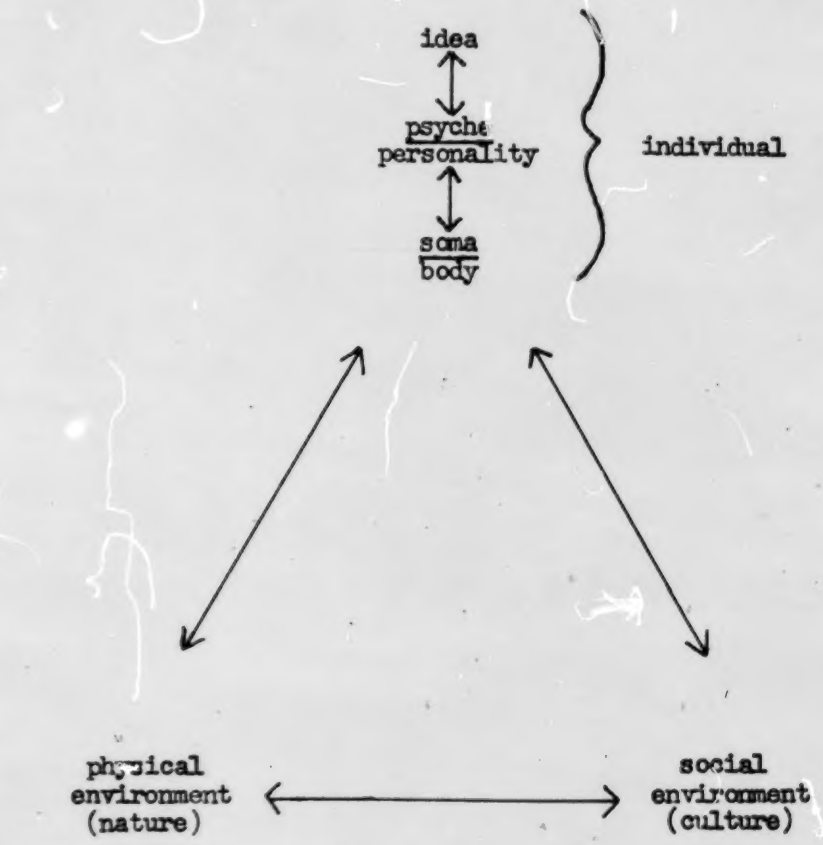
with both the variables and the constants in human thought and feeling and action . . ." (Journal of Philosophy, XXXVI, no. 18 (August 31, 1939), p. 484).


idea
psyche
personality
soma
body
individual
physical
environment
(nature)
social
environment
(culture)
temporal duration, passage of time

Societies and individuals are alike in some respects and different in others. It may appear that this point is hardly worth making. Note, however, that some would assert that every society, and the stages through which it passes, is basically the same as every other society. This is the argument of the cyclical theorists, whether they be Indian or Greek. On the other hand, there are those who insist that no two societies or periods are alike in any essential respect. We usually call these people the "historicists." On either of these views, the value of historical study is difficult to establish. Let us say, however, that there are certain needs and certain problems which every society and every individual, both past and present, are obliged, in the nature of things, to confront. While the answers to these problems may vary from society to society, and from period to period within a given society, all of these groups have in common the problems themselves. Since this is the case, it is possible to learn from the past, and it is profitable to make the effort. (The ancient Greeks, like ourselves, had to deal with a population explosion. Can we learn something of value from the ways in which they handled this problem?)

To conclude this section, let me list some recent developments in historical studies which, I believe, bear upon the structure of this course.

The "Whig interpretation of history" is suspect.[14] The Whig interpretation is related to the larger question, What is the role of ideas in human action? The Whig historians emphasized the inspirational value and motivational power of specific ideas, and particularly of the idea of "liberty." For them the English, American and French Revolutions were in fact struggles to establish (among other things) political liberty. During the first half of the 20th century, the Whig interpretation came under severe attack. "Ideas" became "ideologies," rationalizations of economic and class interests. Thanks to the "neo-Whig" historians, we can no longer think of ideas as "nothing but" rationalizations, but we have been made aware of the irrational and self-serving elements in human behavior.

Not a few historians have begun to use in a deliberate way theories and concepts drawn from the fields of sociology and anthropology. Insofar as the history of ideas is concerned, the findings of sub-disciplines such as, for example, the sociology of the professions and the sociology of knowledge would seem to be especially relevant.

The neologism "psycho-history" refers to the systematic use of psychological and psychoanalytic concepts in the study of historical personalities and groups. Historians often speak of human motivation; unfortunately their observations are not always well-founded. The psycho-historians are trying to do something about this. The results of their efforts to date are somewhat disappointing, partly because students of the psyche do not agree among themselves. There is no generally accepted theory of personality upon which professional historians may depend. Nevertheless this is a field which holds great promise.

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[14]This phrase is the title of an influential book by Sir Herbert Butterfield (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1959).

Political and economic historians, at least in the areas with which I am most familiar, have come to suspect large-scale generalizations. Thanks to the influence of Sir Lewis Namier, among others, the study of particular factions and limited localities has become more common.

In recent years, certain subjects which historians used to treat in a cursory manner, if they did not neglect them entirely, have begun to receive systematic attention. Everyone has heard of women's studies and minority studies (black or Afro-American, Native American, Asian-American, Chicano). The history of women and the history of minorities are aspects of these studies. Other "new" fields, such as the history of childhood and the history of youth, are age-specific. Still others, such as the history of marriage and the history of the family (not family history or genealogy), refer to social institutions hitereto slighted by historians (not by sociologists).

For various reasons which we need not review here, historians have concentrated their attention upon elite groups within human society. This has affected the way in which intellectual history has been conceptualized; it has become, in practice, the history of "intellectual elites." Nowadays a few historians have begun to study "popular culture." This makes sense to me. If we intend to arrive at a comprehensive picture of human society (and this is the way in which we describe our goal), we need to examine relationships such as these: the responses of the elites, either positive or negative, to the popular cultures which they see roundabout them; the ways in which elite ideas are transformed in the process of being popularized; and the strength of the influence, weaker or stronger, which the elites have upon the masses, and vice versa.

This section may be summarized in the following terms: Historians are interested not only in description but also in explanation. I prefer causal explanations. For every event there is a variety of causes, whether natural, social or individual. Since societies and individuals are alike in some respects and different in others, it is possible to learn from the experiences of past generations.

Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to draw out certain definitions and presuppositions upon which a specific history of ideas course can be built. In the second paper in this series, the particular objectives of such a course will be enumerated and a methodology whereby these objectives can be attained will be outlined.